

Dharma Talk at Buddha Center, Second Life
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Last evening I had a meeting of my integral spirituality group, which I host and lead on a biweekly basis here in my home. It is listed on the website www.meetup.com, people can check when meetings are scheduled and come over to participate in the meeting. I present the idea of the importance of an integrated spiritual practice, that is, one in which each person sets up a personal program of practices and incorporates into that program techniques that address each one of the four core “modalities” of human existence: Body (Physical body including exercise activities, proper diet, and one’s personal environmental context); Mind (Intellectual understanding of some framework for what life is all about); Spirit (practices to create spiritual opening, such as meditation and prayer); and Shadow/Emotional (emotional issues and needs that might be interfering or impeding progress with one’s spiritual practice and life in general, dealing with past traumas and past karma).

I brought up the titles of some spiritually oriented books that I had enjoyed in the past, stressing the idea that no matter what you read or enjoy or be intellectually enlightened by, it still isn’t going to get you where you want to be if you are aiming for some kind of spiritual awakening. I was thinking that through all the time that I have been engaged in my own spiritual search and practice, which spans over forty years, I’ve read a lot of books and also series of books, by the same author. One of the first series that I devoured was Carlos Castaneda’s books on his apprenticeship with the Yaqui Indian sorcerer Don Juan. I loved them, and eagerly looked forward to the publication of the next book in the series (they came out about 3 years apart), but I reached a point, perhaps by the sixth book in the series, that, when I finished that book I said, “you know, this is good stuff, great stuff even, but he is basically saying the same thing over and over”. And I stopped reading the new ones that came out after that one.

This happened with several authors. A few years ago it was recommended to me to read Wayne Dyer’s latest book out at the time, The Power of Intention. I loved that one too, and so I got some more of his books and read them. After about 3 or 4, I felt again that basically he is saying the same thing over and over. I have had a lot of experiences like these both before and after. Eckhart Tolle, who wrote The Power of Now and A New Earth. I loved both those books too, in fact, I feel that The Power of Now is the best book on Zen I’ve read, better even than those written by Zen Masters, past or present. But I felt that he too is saying the same thing. And I realize that all spiritual teachers (myself included) are basically saying the same thing over and over again, that the same truth that has been taught repetitively down through the ages.

The problem is that the things they are saying are absolutely true and valid, but that just reading about them is not going to make them real for you, make you experience to the core of your being what they have experienced (or at least allude to). The only thing that is going to make them real for you is some kind of spiritual practice, e.g., meditation, yoga, psychotherapy, prayer, ritual, etc. But even there, any *practice* creates an illusion

that there is a time gap between where you are now and where you want to be as result of practice. The word itself, “practice”, implies that you are currently in a naïve and unskilled state and need to consistently follow a ritualized procedure over a long period of time before you can consider yourself having achieved mastery, in this case, a state of spiritual awakening, enlightenment, whatever you want to call it. So all these practices create TIME between where we are now and where we think we want or need to be.

But the Buddha, and Jesus, and all great teachers were saying that there is no time between where you are and where you want to be. Eckhart Tolle said there is no time, only now, tuning into to breathing, to your inner body, your feeling, your inner energy.

All of us here at this virtual dharma talk are presently on a raft, so to speak, engaging in a spiritual practice, but remember in the Heart Sutra, the last line reads, in Sanskrit “Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!”, which in English means, roughly, “gone, gone, really gone, super duper absolutely gone to the other shore, Enlightenment, Hallelujah!” We have to remember that no matter how much or intensely we practice, that the practice is a raft, or is “the finger point to the moon”. It is not the moon itself. We can be awakened, enlightened, at any time, but there is only one time we can be... and that is NOW.

We are kind of stuck in paradox. Most of us still are still attached to thoughts, the egomind, the chatter, etc. We look to the Buddha, to Jesus, to other great spiritual teachers to guide us, to give us a method so that we can let go of those blocks, which is what they were really teaching. It was not their intention to found a religion. All they wanted to do was to teach people how to wake up just as they did. We need to remember that even though we may not feel like we are awake, we need to keep reminding ourselves to wake up in this moment. That is the ultimate practice.

How do you wake up in this moment? I like to say that enlightenment is as simple as A-B-C. Not necessarily that easy, but that simple. Thoughts are abstractions and filters that keep us from seeing and hearing and feeling things in their suchness. Drop thoughts and truly *see*, truly experience with all of the senses what it is that is all around us, right now, crackling with numinosity, as it were. We would never want to be entertained by mundane TV or movies again, because what is right in front of you right now is magic and miraculous.

Open your inner eyes, take off filters, the dark glasses we wear when we look at everything through our thoughts. Attention to present moment experience. Breathing. The word “Spirit” derives from the word “spiritus” which is Latin for “breath”. Energy is life, existence, “be-ing.” Corporal simply means body awareness, awareness of your inner body, your energy body.

(A participant asks a question about being in heaven)

Yes, you are already in heaven, or hell, it just depends on what you are paying attention to. Do you remember the story about Zen master Ikkyu?

Ikkyu was a Zen Master who lived in Japan during the 15th Century. He was a wandering monk, and something of a maverick, a mischief maker, which often got him in trouble with government officials. At this time he was staying at a temple near a village and one of the villagers wanted to go visit and receive some teaching from the famous master. So he goes to temple finds Ikkyu practicing calligraphy. He bows to Ikkyu and asks, "Master, would you please teach me? I see you are doing calligraphy, would you please make me one and write words of great wisdom? I can put it up in my home and will inspire me towards enlightenment." Ikkyu agrees and writes "Attention", and gives it to the man. He says, "I was looking for more, than that, aren't there more words of wisdom that you can give to me?" Ikkyu says sure, so he gets a fresh piece of paper and writes "Attention, Attention". Again, the man looks and is so disappointed, so once more he asks, "can't you give me something more than just that?" So Ikkyu writes "Attention, Attention, Attention." Now the man is totally exasperated and exclaims "I am sorry master but I just don't get it. Here I am asking you sincerely for words of wisdom and inspiration and all you write is "attention, attention, attention", over and over. What does attention mean, anyway? Ikkyu smiled warmly and said gently "Attention means...*attention!*"

Ikkyu meant "just this." Pay attention to what is. You create it, you are the source. You are the source and that which is perceived, and the perceiver all in one. Only ego tells you that you are separate from all this.

A Zen proverb instructs: When sitting just sit; when walking just walk; above all, don't wobble. That means, don't be thinking of something else while you're doing something. Be present and pay attention, do it fully.

Shift your attention away from the thinking mind and the noise chatter; it's like a filter that keeps you from seeing things as they truly are. Catching yourself as often as you can during the day is the ultimate practice. When you are in the waking dream, involved in your thoughts, wake up and say, ahh, ok, am I paying attention to what *is* right now, the sights, sounds, my breath, my inner body? Continue to do whatever you are doing in that state of awareness, fully present and involved. When you can do that you will have realized your Buddha nature in that moment, be enlightened, awakened. The only difference between us and the Buddha is that the Buddha was able to drop all the filters and distractions permanently. It doesn't mean you don't still think or have thoughts; waking up does not mean empty mind in the sense that there is no content. The Japanese Zen term Mushin, which is often translated as "empty mind" is not a mind without thoughts, just one that has stopped allowing thoughts to dominate conscious attention. It is a mind that is empty of reactions and attachments to thoughts. That is a difficult concept for most people to understand.

Shift attention beyond the thinking mind and expand to include all that is not our thoughts. We usually ignore external phenomena, we ignore our bodies. Can you feel your body from the inside out? If yes, then great! If no, then ask yourself why you were not aware. After all, your hands were there all the time. If you didn't feel them, then you're simply not paying attention.

The Buddha said in the Dhammapada:

All that we are is the result of our thoughts.
It is made up of our thoughts,
It is founded on our thoughts.
If a man (or woman) thinks or acts with a pure thought
Happiness follows him
Like a shadow that never leaves him.

The purest thought is not thought, it is resting in the space between thoughts. Our consciousness emanates from there. Shift attention away from being dominated by thoughts and focus on instead A-B-C. Being present to the totality of now, by attending to the physical sensations occurring right now, to the breath, and to the energy body. And asking yourself, where is the boundary between what I see and my seeing of it, etc., where does the “outside” end and I begin? All boundaries are created by the ego and held in place by FEAR, and that is why it is so difficult to let go of our attachments. You can see purely without attachment. The ego needs to maintain the illusion of materiality, based in the belief in and feeling of separation that is ingrained in us from infancy. The ego is a mental construct that is the mind’s response to that illusion of separation. The ego is bunch of belief systems and strategies designed to act upon this separate world in order to get the things we think we need for survival, to make us feel good and stop feeling bad.

But why? Why does this occur? Well, that is the subject of another dharma talk that I have given in the past and will give again some day on The Continuum Concept, a book on the childrearing practices of a primitive tribe in South America, written by Jean Liedloff in 1970's.

To put closure on this, the ego keeps that distance, maintains that boundary because it believes that if it gave up creating and acting out these strategies to act on world, it is afraid it will get nothing. It simply can’t understand that by dropping all the games and beliefs, you actually get everything. You will re-experience the connectedness you always had and always will have with your true nature. The ego is simply an impulsive and compulsive contraction away from that which we already have and are.

All dharma talks and books say the same thing, give the same message, over and over, because that is all there is to say. There is nothing new; you already have all the answers within you. You don’t need to learn more, you don’t need to know more, all you need to learn is how to relax the ego so that you can re-experience what and who you truly are. So the most that spiritual talks and books can do is to make reassurances to the ego, to entice, cajole, and comfort the ego into letting go of control and the need to control, so you that you can experience your true nature.

My point is not to discourage you from books and reading, but rather to help you to

understand that the more you read, if you stay attached to the thoughts, words, concepts and books, you're going to miss the point. It's like the idea of trying to understand Zen by reading about it, which is like going to a restaurant eating the menu instead of the food itself. We do not want to give up concepts but only our attachment to them, the attachment via which we allow them to dominate our awareness and our moods. Thoughts are tools. They are great servants, but bad masters.

If you've ever been involved in negative train of thoughts that you can't stop or let go of and you're in a terrible mood (and who of us hasn't?), if that happens, the important thing is to wake up right in the midst of it and say, hey, wait a minute, is that going on right now right here in my present reality? No? Then you are allowing those thoughts to beat you up when in reality you are swimming in God-ness at this very moment.

Thoughts are not reality, they are just abstractions, verbal or written symbols of reality and thus they are not in fact what they represent. There is a Zen koan... imagine this scenario... I get up and go to each of you and hand you a cup, then say to you "If you call it a cup I will hit you 30 times, if you call it not a cup I will hit you 30 times. What is it?" Many people are baffled by this, but the proper response is just to take the cup and drink from it. Or not. It is what it is, words are just concepts.